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Secrecy and Liddy

Stansfield Turner and William Webster came to town this week to tell why the CIA and FBI should once again be unleashed. The same day, G. Gordon Liddy was on television showing why they must not be.

In addressing the Palm Beach Round Table, CIA Director Turner and FBI Director Webster repeated their oft-spoken assertions that the reforms decreed in the wake of Watergate have gone too far, hampering the ability of their agencies to collect intelligence and combat lawlessness, respectively.

They see a common enemy in the Freedom of Information Act. To Turner that act requires the declassification of too much material. To Webster, it makes it impossible for the FBI to use paid informants.

The CIA also is chafing under the requirement that it report to eight congressional committees. Turner wants to see the number reduced back to the pre-Watergate two.

In a phrase, they are saying, "Trust us." They would have us believe that the Nixon years were a fluke, that there are no more G. Gordon Liddys in high government circles. "Watergate can't happen again" is their implicit message.

We can't buy that. Watergate didn't exist in a vacuum; it was the natural outcome of the amoral climate created by Richard M. Nixon. And Liddy represented the epitome of that amorality.

During his television interviews he declared that murder is all right when your superiors tell you it is. Even more chilling are the excerpts from his just-published book printed in Time magazine. In those he tells how he burned his arm nearly to the bone to test his courage and how he accepted the fact that the White House might wish to kill him in order to defuse the Watergate scandal.

A federal prison guard summed it up very well when he told Liddy, "It's true what they say. You're a fascist." And this fascist was at various times an FBI agent, a special assistant in the Treasury Department and a White House aide.

Turner and Webster assure us the Liddys are out of vogue in their agencies and we believe them. But it is hard to stamp out such long-entrenched attitudes. And what if another Nixon reaches the White House?

The best safeguard against future abuses is effective public and congressional oversight as provided under the present laws. The FBI has been doing an excellent job under those laws and the CIA's problem with them, as Turner explained it, is how they are perceived by our allies and foreign agents. That problem can be overcome by time.

The fact is there is nothing in the present laws to prevent the protection of legitimate secrets or to hamstring law enforcement. They should be left alone.